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ABSTRACT

In 1991, after 25 workers died in a fire in a rural North Carolina poultry-processing plant, reporters exposed the exploitation that workers had endured and the company's callous disregard for workers' safety. This paper draws on the story of the fire and its victims to challenge some popular assumptions about poverty in general; rural poverty in particular; and the interrelationships between poverty, employment, and education. Rural poverty usually is invisible, hidden from those who do not wish to see by the mass media's sensationalized focus on urban minority poverty. Attention to rural poverty would challenge the blaming and scapegoating in political discourse on poverty by revealing the scope of poverty (prevalent across the nation); the extent to which White people are poor; the worker exploitation that thrives, often profitably, in rural places; the dynamics of rural-urban-suburban relations; and the significance of geographic privilege. In the poultry plant, working conditions were akin to slavery or prison, and workers either did not know about safety regulations and worker rights or were afraid to speak out. In addition to nonchalance about working conditions, many rural states favor industry by keeping property taxes low, which in turn means that public schools are underfunded and provide a low-quality education to those who end up as cheap labor for industry. Meanwhile, the business elite send their own children to private schools. But, although rural students deserve equal educational opportunities, more or better schooling may not ameliorate rural poverty and economic inequality. In fact, a narrow focus on education as the solution deflects attention from poverty's structural origins. Scholars and researchers in educational foundations can play an important role in public discourse over these matters. Contains 31 references. (SV)

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# RURAL POVERTY & EDUCATION: A FOUNDATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

> Rural people are living, and have lived for a long time, at the site of the trouble. They see all around them, every day, the marks and scars of an exploitive national economy.
>
> Wendell Berry[1]

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> Some people are rich and some are poor, and the places where they live preserve their status through the generations.
>
> Jacqueline Jones

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although more than nine million people in rural areas of the United States live in poverty, we hear little about rural poverty.[2] Periodically, the national news exposes the neoslavery conditions in which many of the rural poor work, especially women of color in the south. For example, in 1991, when twenty-five workers died in a fire that swept through a poultry-processing plant in a depressed rural area of North Carolina, reporters exposed the exploitation the victims and their coworkers had endured and the callous disregard their "superiors" had had for the workers' safety.

However, aside from occasional news breaks like this one, rural poverty – and all it suggests about the social and moral ecology of the nation – remains relatively invisibile.[3] In this regard rural poverty contrasts sharply

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with urban poverty, made hypervisible through a sensationalized focus on the sex, drugs, and violence to which the media has reduced the lives of the inner-city poor.

As the federal government, aided and abetted by states competing to make themselves inhospitable to the poor, shreds our social support system while political leaders assert the need to align public schooling ever more closely with the nation's economic "needs," I believe those of us who attempt to influence thought about education and society must keep the full face of poverty clearly in view (Apple and Zenk 1996). Reductive representations of poverty must be challenged along with oversimplifications of the complex relationship between poverty, education, and economic growth (Connell 1994). Such an effort requires, among other things, more attention to the causes and consequences of rural poverty.

Social critics trying to name and expose oppression in its many guises have often drawn on the language of invisibility. Michael Harrington (1962), for example, used the metaphor of invisibility in his influential book *The Other America* to describe the situation of the masses of poor in a land that, in the early 1960s, regarded itself as affluent and prided itself on its prosperity. As those who could flocked to the suburbs, Harrington noted, the poor became geographically segregated. Unseen, they were forgotten – rendered invisible by their physical distance from the nonpoor, but also by the "emotional and existential ignorance" of those who became unable to see what they did not want to see (Harrington 1962, 4-5).

Fifteen years earlier, Ralph Ellison (1947/1980) used the metaphor of invisibility to explore bigotry and race relations in the United States. Ellison's invisible man comes to understand he is invisible not because he

cannot be seen, but "simply because people refuse to see" him. "It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass," he says. "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison 1947/1980, 3).

A similar dynamic hides rural poverty today. The "distorting glass" of the mass media's sensationalized focus on urban poverty serves a dual purpose. First, it hides from view what many people do not want to know about. Popular mythology gives us a picture of the rural poor as self-sufficient farm families content with the pleasures of the simple (and simple-minded) life. Seen apart from this "distorting glass," however, rural poverty would force a closer look at some of the exploitation and injustice that structures our society and affects its educational practice profoundly.

Secondly, the media's focus on a sensationalized urban poverty affirms the picture of poverty many people *do* want to see. As Alec Sherman (1992) has argued, the intense focus on urban poverty and on poor black single-parent families "has hardened the image – the stereotype – of child poverty and parental joblessness and lack of health insurance and school failure as almost exclusively an urban, minority, single-parent phenomena." Oversimplified in this way, the problems of poor children and their families "have become easier to ignore – easier for the middle class to consider them as problems of some isolated underclass, easier for rural Americans to pigeonhole as urban matters, and easier for whites to stigmatize as minority problems" (6).

Attention to rural poverty would challenge this blaming and scapegoating by bringing more clearly into focus (1) the scope of poverty,

prevalent throughout the nation and not just in the inner-city ghettoes, as many imagine; (2) the degree to which white people are poor, and not just people of color, as many imagine (although people of color are disproportionately poor); (3) the exploitation of workers that thrives, often quite profitably, in out-of-the-way places across the land; (4) the dynamics of rural-urban-suburban relations; and (5) the significance of geographic privilege. As Jacqueline Jones (1992) has argued,

> We are where we live.... Our immediate surroundings determine the nature of the schooling our children receive, the kinds of jobs we get, the cost of our auto insurance, the quality of health care and police protection available to us, the merchandise we find at local stores and the prices we pay for it. Our sense of ourselves as individuals and family members is reflected in the tranquillity of tree-lined streets or the filthy clutter of vacant lots (xx).

Rural poverty remains relatively invisible because it is shameful yet profitable and because the rural poor, hidden away without a political voice, pose little threat to their wealthier and more politically astute suburban neighbors.

In what follows I challenge some popular assumptions about poverty, discuss the fire in the poultry processing plant, suggest what might be learned from it, speculate on the ideological significance of the relative invisibility of rural poverty, and comment on implications of the discussion for foundations scholars and other educational critics.

## II. "POVERTY" MEANS RURAL POVERTY

Thanks to a sensationalized focus on urban poverty, depicted as largely black, and on the culture of sex, drugs, and violence to which it allegedly gives rise,

"the image of an urban 'underclass' has become the central representation of poverty in American society" (Reed 1992, 21). For several years I have been asking students in my foundations of education classes to explore public opinion on poverty by asking people why they believe the poor are poor. My students generally find many of those they talk with equate poverty with welfare, and equate welfare with drugs, violence, and crime in urban inner cities. Asked about poverty, people often respond by denouncing those they regard as welfare cheats and the drug-infested, violent ghettos with which they associate welfare and urban poverty.

This narrow and distorting notion of poverty shows up in the field of education in the discourse of "at risk" – a code word, it seems, not for poor children per se, but rather for children of the urban inner-city poor (Swadener 1995, 20-21). Although children of the rural poor "do not fit our stereotypes of needy and at-risk children," they nevertheless are more likely to be poor than either nonrural children or children in the United States overall (Sherman 1992, 1).

Contrary to popular opinion, poverty is not predominately urban, black, or northern. Most poor people in the United States live outside central cities (Jones 1992, 269). Comparing rural and urban poverty, U.S. Census data show 17.3 percent of all residents in rural areas live in poverty, compared with 14.6 percent of all urban residents (Tyson 1995 [April 25], 3).

Also, although people of color in the United States are disproportionately poor and although an astronomical 53 percent of all rural black children now live in poverty, most of the poor are white (Sherman 1992, 4). Census data for 1990 show poor whites outnumbered poor blacks

by a ratio of two to one, and a large majority of the rural poor (almost 73 percent) was white (Jones 1992, 269; Summers 1995, 216).

Given the disguised (and sometimes blatant) politics of race that has shaped so much of the discourse on poverty in this country, the disproportionately high number of people of color living in poverty is often misinterpreted. Whereas highlighting the relationship between race and poverty can call attention to the racism that undeniably contributes to the perpetuation of poverty, the relationship between race and poverty also can be, and often is, used to suggest poverty somehow results from an alleged black pathology. Although the language changes periodically, the suggestion that white people are not poor because poverty comes from blackness has been part of the popular discourse on poverty at least since the Civil War. After the war, as white people increasingly fell into poverty, "Southern elites seemed to conspire among themselves, within the public realm at least, to ignore – or conceal – that fact. As a result, white tenants and sharecroppers were conspicuous in their absence from the post bellum debate on the Southern 'labor question'" (Jones 1992, 47). So it is today. The equation of poverty with urban poverty, and urban poverty with alleged black pathology, runs deep in the public imagination. If poverty comes from blackness, white people are not only not responsible, but immune.

Finally, contrary to the idea that poverty "concentrates" itself in the inner-city ghettoes of the North, more of the poor live in the South than in any other region of the United States. This is true of the rural poor as well as of the poor in general. The South contains all but eighteen of the 206 "persistently low-wage counties" in the nation, along with almost 54 percent of the rural poor (Williams and Dill 1995, 345). Figures for 1987 show a

rural poverty rate of 11.2 percent in the Northeast, compared with a rate in the South of exactly twice that, 22.4 percent; in the West the rural poverty rate was 18.3 percent, and in the Midwest, 14.4 percent (Fitchen 1991, 116).

As Michael Katz (1989) has argued, the public discourse on poverty historically has been used to draw a moral distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor. While the rationale for this distinction has changed from time to time, the discourse has continued to perform this social function. The distinction between the deserving and the undeserving is drawn today between the rural and urban poor, but with a catch. Public imagery depicts the rural (deserving) poor as self-sufficient farm families and the urban (undeserving) poor as depraved welfare queens and the drug-dealing men in their lives, unable or unwilling to support themselves except through handouts and crime. The suggestion here is that the rural poor, unlike the urban poor, deserve help, but (fortunately) live off the land and so do not need it after all.

In fact, only 2 percent of U.S. residents live on farms (Sherman 1992, 15). And although housing costs tend to be lower in rural areas, costs of living otherwise are about the same in rural and metropolitan areas. Earnings in rural areas, however, are only three-quarters those in cities and suburbs, and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) payments for families with children in rural areas are only about half what they are in metropolitan areas. Not only do heavily rural states tend to offer poor families the least generous AFDC benefits (set state by state),[4] but eligibility rules, such as those pertaining to two-parent families, limit poor rural families' access to benefits (Sherman 1992, 54-59).

## III. THE SITE OF THE TROUBLE

To offer a fuller picture of rural poverty and its human significance, I want to tell the following true story, created from reports in local and national newspapers:

*On September 5, 1991, a fireball rolled through a chicken processing plant in the small town of Hamlet, North Carolina. Twenty-five workers were killed -- mostly women, about half white and half of color. Fifty-six more people were injured.*

*Shortly before the fire, the plant manager told a maintenance worker to hurry repairs on a hydraulic line to minimize production "downtime." That line later ruptured, technically causing the fire. Workers were unable to escape the smoke and fire because management, worried that workers would steal chicken parts, had locked several doors. Although the plant had been the scene of at least two other fires in its eleven years of operation, no one had ever inspected it.*

*Emmett Roe had learned the food business in the Northeast, then moved south to open the Imperial Food Products Inc. plant in 1980. Although he subsequently pled guilty to involuntary manslaughter and is now serving a sentence of just under twenty years, comments right after the fire suggest no one else saw themselves as responsible or implicated in any way.*

*"Plenty of doors ... were open," the plant manager, Brad Roe (Emmett's son) said the day of the fire. "Certain doors are locked at certain times. I can't tell you which doors were locked, if any were locked.... The employees know how to get in and out of the plant."*

*"People can throw rocks at this agency ... if they want. But there are going to be accidents," said the state's labor commissioner. "We're understaffed," explained his assistant.*

*"We're terribly sorry about the accident, but it doesn't fall under our responsibility at all," said a spokesperson for the U.S. Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service, an employee of which had visited the plant daily to ensure the chicken was properly cooked and packaged, but had never reported any safety violations for workers. Federal officials had questioned the state's inspection program during an evaluation the year before, but only called for "more effective utilization of resources."*

*In the days after the fire, reporters flocked to town and learned something of what life in the plant had been like. Workers said they had been allowed one trip to the bathroom per shift. For any extra trip, they got a half-demerit point. Three demerit points, and they were fired. "You know how women do, some have personal problems," one worker said. "I'd usually hold my water all night and wait until 11:30 p.m. to go to the bathroom."*

*"They'd talk to us like we were inmates at a prison," another worker said. "We had one seven-minute bathroom break per day, which we had to request permission to take. And they would threaten to fire us if we took sick days, even with doctor's orders."*

*Workers often smelled gas fumes and slipped on chicken parts dropped on the greasy floors. "We used to call them and tell them [about the fumes] and they'd say, 'There, there, just get your work out,'" one worker said. "They had a rule that if you slipped three times, you were out*

*of here," said another. "They assumed you weren't wearing the right shoes."*

*"We had to work here," an employee explained. "We complained to everybody, but we needed to work. I needed the money." The per-capita income in the county at the time was less than $12,000, and the unemployment rate had risen to almost 15 percent. With 250 jobs, the non-unionized poultry processing plant was the town's largest employer.*

*The fire erupted, twenty-five people died, reporters came in, and some of the survivors' comments showed up in national newspapers. Lawyers came to town looking for business, along with a public relations firm specializing in business-image management. Jessie Jackson came too. "The people invited me to come to Hamlet," he said. "The fire is to OSHA and workers' rights what Birmingham was to the Civil Rights Movement." Jackson "is not coming at the request of the city of Hamlet," said Abbie Covington, the mayor.*[5]

Under the thumb of a callous, profit-driven man in an environment that gave him free reign, the women "held their water" and kept their jobs because they and their families needed the few dollars an hour they earned. Many of those who died were single parents. Some of the workers knew they were being exploited and endangered, but also knew the cost of speaking up. Others seemingly had little perspective on their situation. "It never dawned on me that the doors were locked," Loretta Goodwin, a line worker, testified before a House committee. "I didn't know about making a complaint. I didn't know anything to complain about" (Taylor and Swoboda 1991 [Sept. 13], D1).

Meanwhile, Emmett Roe is in jail, but little else has changed in terms either of the social conditions that invited the fire or of the popular picture of rural poverty as benign, if not nonexistent. In North Carolina and beyond, the poor, including the rural poor, remain vulnerable to exploitation and intimidation. The plantation mentality of the Old South continues to shape boss-worker relations in hidden-away places, and other people continue to benefit from this state of affairs in multiple ways. The poultry industry, with injury and illness rates roughly double those in the automobile and mining industries, is now an $18.6 billion a year business.[6] Nonchalance about low-skill, low-wage workers' safety keeps state taxes lower than they otherwise would be. Tax policies that favor industry over property-tax-funded public education enable those who hire workers with few skills to keep their payrolls down.

According to Bob Hall, research director of the Institute for Southern Studies,

> The business elite ... pats itself on the back for furnishing jobs to unskilled workers, but has purposefully kept [North Carolina] public schools underfunded for decades. At their behest, the community college system tailors training programs to new employers' specific job needs, and offers no training about basic worker rights (Hall 1991 [Sept. 15]), J8).

An investigation by the *Alabama Journal* into the economic and political dimensions of school funding in that heavily rural state led reporters to observe similarly that "forestry and farming interests ... work at the local and state level to keep property taxes down ... even though county and city property taxes are the primary means of local

support for education" (Bentley, Freedman, and Jimmerson 1989, 19). "If Alabama is to fill a future role of something more than a developing nation – providing unskilled workers for low-paying jobs – the educational needs of the people of the state must be addressed," Bentley et al. (1989) concluded (17). However, if not, if Alabama and other rural areas in the country are to fill precisely this role of supplying cheap labor, a two-tier educational system -- with poorly funded and low quality public schooling for some alongside much better private schooling for others -- makes sense in terms of sustaining existing economic and political relationships. Odell Tumblin, superintendent of schools in Wilcox County, Alabama, understands this well. "The problems of the school system," she said, "are part of a divided community where most people with political power and financial means care little about the public schools. Their children attend private schools" (quoted in Bentley et al. 1989, 18).

In sum, as places where cheap labor and subservient workers often can be found, poor rural areas offer tangible benefits to many others – in one sense at no cost. Unlike the urban poor who walk "city streets among prosperous Americans, the rural poor remain out of view in remote mountains and dry wastelands" (Tyson 1995 [April 25], 3). Segregated in this way, the rural poor pose no threat.

## IV. THE IDEOLOGICAL PAYOFF OF INVISIBILITY

In addition to the more obvious "benefits," the relative invisibility of rural poverty offers an emotional and ideological payoff to all who would prefer not to think about the lives of the rural poor. First, regarding rural poverty as

a nonissue protects a distorted picture of both the extent of poverty and the extent to which the poor work outside the home. Since proportionally more of the working poor live in rural than in urban areas, a serious look at rural poverty would challenge the association of poverty with welfare and crime and the assumption that poor people do not work. Almost 65 percent of the poor in rural areas (and 54 percent in metropolitan areas) live in families with one or more working members – a group of people who in the past decade have seen their incomes fall more than any other broad category of workers (Tyson 1995 [April 25], 3; Tyson 1995 [May 10], 4).

Secondly, faith in job creation per se – the idea that if everyone had a job, poverty would disappear – escapes challenge more easily when little attention is paid to rural poverty (Rural Sociological Society 1993, 2). More jobs would "cure" poverty, of course, only if the jobs paid more than poverty-level wages. New jobs created in rural areas, however, typically pay little more than minimum wage (DeYoung and Lawrence 1995, 106). The observation Harrington (1962) made thirty-four years ago remains much to the point:

> The industry that comes to [the rural South] is not concerned with moral or social uplift. It seeks out rural poverty because it provides a docile cheap labor market.... People who have been living in the depressed areas of agriculture now live part-time in the depressed areas of industry.... Poverty, it would seem, can be quite useful if it is properly manipulated and exploited (48).

Today, many of the rural poor have but two choices: a meager welfare check or a job working under neoslavery conditions (Jones 1992, 286).

Local elites in many poor rural counties, especially in the South and especially in areas with large populations of color, recruit low-wage, low-skill industries, then invest their profits elsewhere, outside these communities. Most of the employers in these industries are white. Employers routinely lay off workers as they become eligible for pay raises and promotions; "gentlemen's agreements" in many business communities keep employers from hiring each other's employees (Williams and Dill 1995, 348-350). As Williams and Dill (1995), among others, have pointed out, the master-slave tradition of the Old South lives on – with the blessing of the nation at large in the sense that it is tolerated. Until and unless all that sustains this tradition is eradicated, the exploitation will continue (Williams and Dill 1995, 350).

Thirdly, paying little attention to rural poverty enables us not to notice the extent to which poor rural areas have become preferred sites for prisons and waste dumps. As Janet Fitchen (1991) has observed: "Perhaps nothing demonstrates the close ties between rural and urban America better than the state prisons, largely filled with urban inmates, but mostly located in rural places, where populations are sparse and land is available" (215). Rural lands across the nation similarly "are becoming the ultimate service industry of our times – the receptacle of the unwanted refuse of a waste-generating society" (Fitchen 1992, 226).

> Thus in 1989 the county in rural New York that had just won bottom place on the state's ranking of per capita income, Allegany County, was actively fighting off a radioactive waste dump, was facing a proposal for a regional incinerator-ash dump, and, at the same time, was lured by the prospect of jobs to press the state to bring it a prison, which, indeed, it was

> awarded in 1990.... "We were picked," stated an antidump activist, "precisely because we're poor, rural, and have no clout in the legislature" (Fitchen 1992, 240-241).

Better school policies and practices obviously will not alter the utility and profitability of regions desperate enough to court the nation's prison and waste industries. But more attention to this situation would improve the quality and relevance of thought about education and educational reform. I say more about this in the next section.

## V. FIXING THE DISCOURSE, NOT THE POOR

Schools too often have been assigned the lead role in the social project of "improving poor people." This focus not only has not reduced poverty, it has deflected attention from the structural origins of economic distress (Katz 1995, 4). Compared with schools in metropolitan areas, rural schools are underfunded and poorly staffed, and this situation should be changed to improve the educational experience of students in rural areas (Herzog and Pittman 1995, 114-116). There is no reason to assume, however, that more schooling – or widespread access to the Internet – in and of itself will ameliorate poverty, rural or urban.

Although educational levels have increased significantly in rural areas in recent decades, "poverty and economic inequality remain high and persistent in rural America" (Rural Sociological Society 1993, 41). A study published in 1993 found "average years of education [had] had no significant effect on the growth of relatively high-skill or 'complex' manufacturing jobs in rural areas" in the previous two decades (Teixeira 1992, 432). And contrary to the suggestions of President Clinton and Vice President Gore,

access to the Internet will not necessarily alter the dynamics of rural economies (Tyson 1995 [April 27], 3). As Gene Summers, chair of the Rural Sociological Society Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty, has pointed out, information technology can be used to turn remote areas into "places where you can get our own version of offshore, third-world cheap labor" (quoted in Tyson 1995 [April 25], 3). On the one hand, credentials and technological know-how clearly do help individuals compete in a tight job market. On the other, a focus on issues of educational skills and attainment ought not supplant concerns with the causes, consequences, and real significance of poverty and exploitation.

These concerns often are shoved aside, however, because they are unsettling and do not lead to easy answers or even to clear questions. I have been haunted during the researching and writing of this article by the words of Chonna Campbell, orphaned at 16 when her mother died in the Hamlet fire. Interviewed in the days after the fire, Chonna told reporters:

> My mama told me never to do work like this. My mama worked hard for us, but she said we should not have to do strenuous work like she did. She would come home and be sick from the smell. She told me to get an education so I don't have to work like this. That's what I'll do (quoted in Seese 1991 [Sept. 6], A1).

We (foundations scholars) need a way to think about schooling and education that allows us to see both the wisdom in Chonna's mother's advice to her daughter and the horror it reflects. The horror lies in a world in which credentials count more than people and in which schools have been given the

job of rationing out these vitally important "wards" against powerlessness and exploitation.

Something is terribly wrong, however, when the acquisition of educational credentials becomes not only, in the extreme, a life-and-death matter, but also something over which individuals have far less control than many of us would like to believe – indeed have been taught to believe. As Jones (1992) has said, where we live has very much to do not only with how we think about ourselves, but also with the opportunities, educational and otherwise, open to us. It does not have to be this way and should not be this way, but is, and the tragedy in Hamlet makes clear how high the stakes in such a world really are.

In times such as these when politicians (and some educational critics) sensationalize, racialize, and politicize poverty shamelessly, I believe foundations scholars and others who attempt to influence thought about education and society must resist pressures to narrow our spheres of concern. Instead, we need to take on, as best we can, the complexity that serious analysis of education and its social context always entails. We need to develop analyses that embrace rather than reduce the complexity, for example, of the relationship between race, poverty, education, and the lives of children.

As Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) have argued with respect to rural poverty, "It is important to push the analysis ... beyond what one sees on the surface. It is not enough to look around and say, 'There aren't enough jobs here, so let's try to get some.'... The analysis needs to start with *why* there are too few jobs..." (133). Similarly, it is not enough to note that legions of children are now regarded as "at risk" but then stop short of asking why so

many have been threatened in this way. Authors of a Phi Delta Kappa study assumed "children are at risk if they are likely to fail – either in school or in life" (Frymier and Gardner, cited in Polakow 1993, 153). Using this definition, it is not enough to note how frightening (risky) life is for millions of children without questioning *what* in school and in our broader social life contributes to the risk and *why* it is tolerated. Blaming poverty on blackness, then rationalizing racism as an understandable response to the consequences of life in poverty (often including fear, suspiciousness, and hunger or chronic pain as well as, later on, theft, drugs, and despair) shuts down rather than opens up serious inquiry into the significance of growing up poor and black in a racist world that blames poverty on the poor.

In these times when many people regard the poor and powerless (and so the places where they live) as dispensable and the exploitation to which they are vulnerable as tolerable or even inevitable, we need a language of educational criticism that speaks truthfully and meaningfully to the tragic dimensions of our shared social life. Raymond Williams (1966) makes an important distinction between perceiving events as tragic and seeing them as merely accidental. "Tragedy" suggests human agency and responsibility: Things might have been different were it not for human failing – hence, the tragedy. "Accident," on the other hand, suggests events beyond human control and for which humans therefore cannot be held responsible. Significantly, "The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics." However, "To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and

universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy" (Williams 1966, 49).

We need a language of educational criticism that helps us see more clearly and name more truthfully the social tragedy hidden in the habits and patterns of daily life. We need a way of thinking and so of talking about the latent tragedy that erupts periodically (as in the Hamlet fire) but otherwise remains invisible in the values, assumptions, and pre-judgments that color our perceptions and shape our relationships.

Foundations scholars – who tend to bring concerns with meaning, significance, and context to the broad conversation about education and society – have an important role to play not only in developing such a language and in making the exploitation and devaluation of the poor, including the rural poor, more visible in its complexity and its horror. We also, I believe, need to challenge more vigorously the assumption that the nation's economic needs, narrowly defined, ought to shape educational aims; to repudiate more decisively the idea that exploitation of the poor and powerless is inevitable or tolerable; and to embrace more straightforwardly the moral dimensions of our work.

What do we care about, and what should be care about? These are perhaps the most educational questions to ask in these morally and politically frightening times. Foundations scholars have an important role to play not only in raising these questions, but also in sharing their own answers and in helping to create a climate in which the life-and-death issues of our times (poverty, exploitation, devaluation of human life) can be named, felt, and seen for what they are, not hidden and rationalized – out of sight, out of mind.

NOTES

1. Cited in Theobald and Nachtigal 1995, 135.
2. 1990 Census data, cited in Rural Sociological Society 1993, 40.
3. The National Newspaper Index shows only seventeen stories on rural poverty published between 1993 and 1995. Scholarly efforts also have focused largely on the inner-city poor in metropolitan areas (Hirschl and Brown 1995, 229).
4. Discrepancies among states are large. Mississippi, for example, in 1990 had a maximum AFDC benefit equal to 14 percent of the federal government's poverty level for a family of 3, whereas California and parts of New York State offered benefits equal to 80 percent of the poverty line (Sherman 1992, 56).
5. I compiled this story from reports published in September 1991 in *The Atlanta Journal The Atlanta Constitution, The Charlotte Observer, The Greensboro News & Record, The New York Times, The News & Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina), The Pittsburgh Press,* and *The Washington Post*.
6. Figures supplied by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics show 22.7 cases of injury and illness per 100 full-time workers in the poultry industry compared with 10.1 cases in the automobile industry and 11.2 cases in the mining industry. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the farm value of poultry production in 1995 was $18.6 billion (personal communication).

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